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## Sarah McNally moved to New York, worked in a bar: A very Irish life, cut violently short

The 41-year-old Longford woman's death has resonated among the Irish in New York and at home



Sarah McNally had lived and worked in New York for the past 10 years. Illustration: Paul Scott



[Keith Duggan](#) Queens, New York

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When it rains hard in [New York](#), as it did all day Tuesday, the city becomes something else. The awnings and street signs deliver rushes of water, millions of shoes turn dark and squelchy, umbrellas clash, the steps to the subway turn filthy and the mood is hurried and fretful. It becomes Gotham. The Queens neighbourhood of Maspeth is about a 50-minute journey from Manhattan, on the 7 or E line to Jackson Heights and a short bus down to what was, for decades, one of the Irish strongholds of the borough. No matter how many times you make

the brief crossing from the teeming city to the Irish enclaves, the difference between those two worlds is always breathtaking.

The death of Sarah McNally, the [Longford](#) town woman who died after being stabbed in the bar where she worked on Grand Avenue in Maspeth, happened at teatime last Saturday. But the shock and reverberations will continue long after the legal proceedings against Marcin Pieciak, the 36-year-old who has been charged with murder in the second degree and who was formally indicted in court on Friday, have concluded. (He was not present for the hearing, with his legal representative saying he remained in hospital recovering from a number of self-inflicted stab wounds.)

What happened was a grotesque and shocking act of violence which took place in a public, social setting. Because of that, it was subject to sensational treatment by the city tabloids, which have a tradition of covering murder crimes in a hard-boiled narrative way. The sudden deluge of reporters and television crews outside the bar pitched what was an unfolding nightmare for the victim, her family and friends into a different dimension. Shocking and incomprehensible as Sarah McNally's death was, to see her face and the images of The Céilí House, the bar where she worked, projected through city reportage must have added an additional layer of upset and disorientation.

On Tuesday afternoon, The Céilí House was quiet. The woman behind the bar was friendly and quickly became tearful when Sarah's name was mentioned. She was polite and preferred not to speak: this wasn't the time. Across from the bar counter was a remembrance vigil of candles and cards and photographs of Sarah. Two men were having a drink at the bar, but it was that time of the day when all bars are quiet. It would have been entirely understandable if the reception to a stranger walking in and asking questions had been brusque. But the mood in that moment was warm if exhausted.

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You don't have to spend long in The Céilí House to get a sense of what it must mean to its regulars in Maspeth. It resembles many Irish American bars in decor and atmosphere: dark wood, low lighting and with an aura of informal friendliness. The Céilí House was Sarah McNally's place of work, but it was – and will remain – also a place, it became clear from the tributes afterwards, where she was among friends, where people thought the world of her. Irish bars in American cities – proper neighbourhood bars – are more than somewhere to have a drink and watch a game. They have served as a kind of sanctuary to the countless Irish over the years who came to New York to build new lives.

The striking thing about The Céilí House is that it is one of the few visible symbols of Irishness on Grand Avenue. Bukowski's, just across the street, is a bar which celebrates – somewhat wonderfully – both the legacy of the writer Charles Bukowski and the county of Longford in general. Posters and Bukowski quotes sit easily among transatlantic mementos: a Gaelic football with Abbeylara written on it and a street sign for Ballinalee. The funny thing is that in pubs in Ireland, such totems can seem pointless. But in a city like New York, they acquire a kind of potency. You step through that door, and you are instantly returned to a familiar world.

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In general, Maspeth's Grand Avenue is a familiar fusion of restaurants and shops with no easily identifiable ethnic pull. You wouldn't necessarily distinguish it as Irish. It wasn't always like this.



“I am here 30 years. When I first came here there was a really large influx of Irish to Maspeth, to Woodside,” says Eileen Reilly, the executive director for Maspeth Town Hall, which runs a series of educational and social programmes.



The Céilí House bar in Queens, New York. Photograph: Michael Fitzpatrick

“And when families came here, they actually became families with each other because their own families were back in Ireland. We had a Tiger programme here” – the Tiger Foundation says its mission is to break the cycle of poverty in New York City – “and some of those families are still friendly from when their children were two years old here. So, for Thanksgiving or whatever, they would go to each other’s houses. And then when Ireland started getting ... money, many people went back. And they were building left and right. That’s all we would hear – who built this or that. And when things turned again, from what I hear some did really well and for others, it wasn’t what they expected.”

It was close to 5pm when I called, unannounced, and although Reilly was about to dash home, she made time to speak. The building is less than a 10-minute walk from The Céilí House. It’s a handsome dormer bungalow, with cream wood framing and enormous panelled windows. It’s been a fixture in Maspeth since the 1890s, originally as a schoolhouse on the Brinkerhoff farm and later a police precinct. Now it is a beacon for after-schoolers and senior citizens. Reilly helps to co-ordinate an after-school initiative that services almost 2,000 children through neighbourhoods such as Corona, Woodside and Ridgewood. The programme employs almost 300 people – as we sit chatting in her office, several staff call “good night, Miss Reilly” from down the hallway as they leave for the evening. In short, it’s the civic heart of the Maspeth community.

*[ Boyfriend of Sarah McNally arrested and charged with her murder in New York ]*

Reilly, whose parents came from Ireland, had, of course, heard about the death of Sarah McNally. She knew that the victim was from Ireland but not much more than that.

“It was a shock. We have a tremendous number of seniors here and to hear something like that ... For that poor girl, my God, it is just awful to think about. This is a pretty quiet area. You’ll get a few things on the avenue, but I think people feel safe here. We have the 104th precinct and they do a lot of patrols here – not so many foot patrols any more because the money isn’t there.”

Maspeth, Reilly says, was extremely Irish in character “at one time”. Queens is a borough with neighbourhoods in a constant state of reinvention. From the bridge, you could make out the silhouette of city skyscrapers through the low rain-filled sky but Maspeth is its own place. The marble emblem for Maspeth bears the portrait of a native American with the inscription: Mespeatches Indian 1638. Down the street, the 9/11 memorial bears the names of the 25 local people who lost their lives that day in 2001. Squad 288 had the single largest loss of life of firefighters among all the FDNY firehouses. Among the names on that list of 11 are Denis Carey, Thomas Gardner, John Fanning and Capt Patrick Waters. Property prices have soared in the area in recent years, prompting some long-time residents to sell up. Over the past couple of decades, the community has become multi-ethnic in profile while retaining its own sense of identity.

“It’s a pleasant place,” Reilly says. “Everyone, no matter the nationality, takes care of their homes. I think there’s a community feel here. I think it is more accepting now than even five years ago when people were nervous about new people moving in. But everybody is out of the house so much today. Everybody is working. Do you know your neighbour any more? It is a different thing.”

Sarah McNally had lived and worked in New York for the past 10 years. She was in her early 30s when she moved from Longford, which is young in life terms but still requires a spirit of independence and courage to have the fortitude to move across the Atlantic and build a different life for oneself. Like so many Irish émigrés, she worked in the hospitality trade around the city.

Although the numbers of Irish moving to New York have fallen dramatically since the deluge of the 1980s and 1990s, Irish pubs endure in the city because they are largely well established and well run. And like many Irish émigrés, Sarah McNally was of that community. The photographs published after her death last Saturday show a woman with a beautiful, open expression. Patrons who spoke to reporters in the immediate hours after the violence spoke of her friendliness and her generosity in the brief nuggets of the shell-shocked.

#### *[ Tributes left at Queens bar where Irish woman Sarah McNally died in alleged knife attack ]*

One of the reasons why Sarah McNally’s death has resonated so strongly among the Irish community in New York and throughout the counties at home is that her story is so relatable and time-honoured. Countless Irish people have made that move and have discovered in the network of Irish pubs in the boroughs a navigable and familiar system of contacts and advice and friends, which can be invaluable in a vast, new city.

Irish bars in New York still run along county allegiances: the Donegal pubs, the Longford pubs, the Kerry pubs and so on. All any new arrival needed, in the decades before global communication, was the address of the bar and the name of the person who could either give them work or point them to where they’d find it.

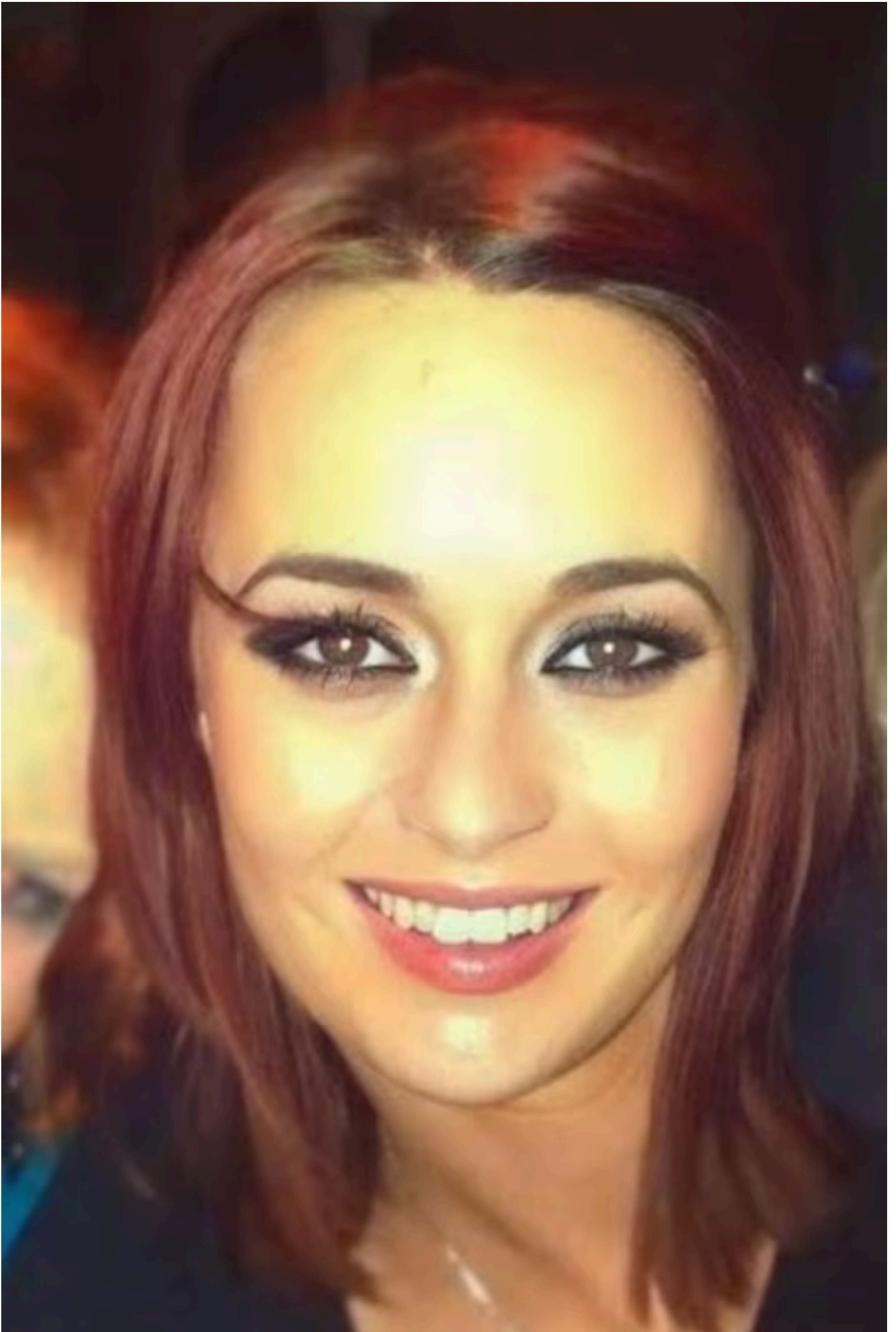
That system has endured. And it means that Irish pubs in New York represent a safe haven for patrons and staff. The appalling violence inflicted on Sarah McNally was a violation of that, too. The Céilí House was a place to which she gravitated for work. But it was also her community. It was where she was among friends, right up to the appalling moments of last Saturday evening.

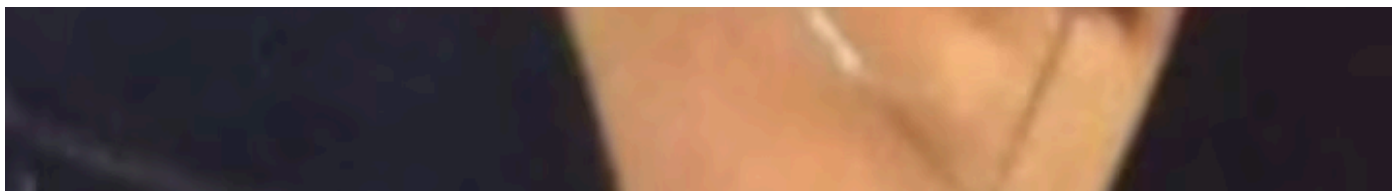
The Irish community was swift in its response to the tragedy. A memorial fund was quickly established in the days after her death.

“Sarah was a beloved bartender from Queens, who was taken from us far too soon,” it reads.

“We hope to support Sarah’s family in Ireland and raise funds in honour of her memory here in New York. Everyone that knew Sarah knows how special and kind she was, how she would remember the little things about each and every person that she met. She was so beloved by her Céilí House family and beyond.”







Sarah McNally was in her early 30s when she moved from Longford to the US. Photograph: rip.ie

***It was unprovoked and a devastating loss for the family. We are using every resource to make sure there is accountability***

— Queens district attorney Melinda Katz

Her grief-stricken family arrived in the city to take her remains home early this week. In the days since, her family have appealed for privacy.

On Thursday, Joseph Kenny, the chief of detectives with the NYPD, gave a briefing on the investigation, confirming that Sarah McNally had been in a relationship with the man who is now charged with her murder and that they had been living at an address in nearby Glendale. The briefing included a graphic description of how Marcin Pieciak is alleged to have carried out the fatal assault, a procedural standard in the US which is starkly different from the Irish methodology. The details are as harrowing and terrible as it gets.

The Queens district attorney Melinda Katz would, through her work, be well acquainted with violent crime but said on Thursday that the nature of the attack had “shocked” the Queens community.

“It was unprovoked and a devastating loss for the family,” she said. “We are using every resource to make sure there is accountability.”

In the bar life, you meet many people. In an era of remote working, of hours and years staring into a computer screen, the bar trade has remained true to the idea of the workplace as a society. Over a decade in New York, Sarah McNally must have shared a pleasant word with an inestimable number of people and formed valuable friendships with many of those who are today in a state of heartbreak and disbelief. They will remember her for a long time in the various corners of New York. It is probable that there will be a moment of silent reflection before the big GAA match in Gaelic Park this weekend. And silence is appropriate: it is little wonder that Sarah McNally’s nearest and dearest have been unable to speak about her, at least for the time being.

It’s Saturday again and there are no words.

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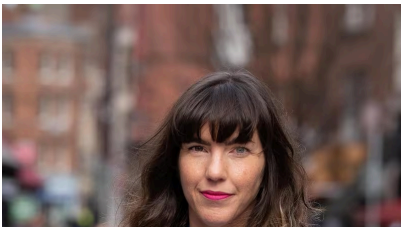
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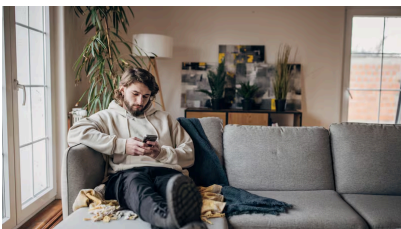


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